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SOME
OBSERVATIONS
By
Dr. Frank Crane

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Some Observations



Some Observations
on
Books and Libraries in General
and on
“The Sacred Books and Early Literature
of the East” in Particular

By Dr. Frank Crane

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Oriental Foundation
New York

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I

THE LIBRARY

Every man of taste wants a Book.

Every man of taste, and some means, wants a Library, a room of Books, a Book temple, a private chapel where he can retreat from the world and hold communion with the imperial past.

Here are his silent counsellors, his friends, each with its priceless wisdom enclosed in its covers, never intruding, waiting to be consulted, ready and willing to impart their garnered wisdom of heaven and earth.

Without a Library the most sumptuous home is coarse and common.

The Library is the touch of culture, the mark of genuine good breeding, the one guaranty of a real aristocracy of spirit.

When you enter the house of the successful man, it is not the gold furniture of his

parlor that impresses you, nor his tinted boudoirs, nor his regal halls and stairways, nor his baronial dining room, nor his expensive paintings and curios; it is his library. That is the touchstone of his quality. That will show you whether he is a cheap money-maker who has hired experts to decorate his chambers, or a superior soul to whom riches mean the expansion of his finer self and the gratification of its nobler wants.

Books are books, whether in pamphlet form or levant. But while it is the contents of the book that count and not its binding and decoration, still there is something profoundly gratifying in a good book worthily made up. The real book-lover not only likes to read his book, but he loves to handle it, to have it in such print and paper as shall appeal to his sense of richness, to look at it as it lies upon his table or stands on his shelf so bound and stamped that it sheds dignity and strength.

The veriest democrat wants to be aristocratic in his books.

And what jewel of crafty workmanship, what dress of rare fabric, what piece of furniture or statue or painting, can compare with the luxurious flavor of a lordly book!

It combines the genius of craftsmanship with the stuff of mind. Fingers and fancy have joined to produce it.

Upon my library table is my latest acquisition, "The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East." They are beautiful volumes. I fondle them as a miser his money. I pick at them, dip into them here and there, pilfering a paragraph, peeping at a page, surreptitiously antedating the time when I may gorge.

The advent of a book into the house is like the birth of a child. It fills you with dreams, anticipations. You wonder what your new son will become. You plan already his college, his career.

What anticipatory delights are concealed in these volumes! Hours of long browsing. Evenings of dreams. Rainy days and wintry, when the fire shall be lit and the lamp, and with my book I can escape, escape the humdrum of this present, escape my little concerns and worries and roam enchanted fields.

As I turn the leaves I find these promising subjects.

The Tel-El-Amarna letters, one of the most astonishing discoveries of modern exploration. An Egyptian peasant woman in 1888, delving in the sand at Tel-El-Amarna, Egypt, found a mass of over 300 tablets stored in ancient boxes. They proved to be the carefully preserved correspondence of the Egyptian court of about 1400 B.C.

Here is the Epic of Gilgamesh, early hero of Babylon, and his adventures with godless Ishtar, written 2000 years before Christ.

Here are love songs of the Ancient Chinese, tales from the Persian and Arabic, legends of the Jews from the farthest past, moral maxims and philosophic reflections that were old, ritualized and crooned at heathen altars before the first line of our Bible was penned.

And it is in good clear English. No mortal man could read all those things in their original tongues. Scholars from many universities have brought us these excellent translations, and a marvelous anthology of the East is brought within the reach of any one who can read English.

It is a book for the layman. To each group of ancient writings is prefixed a translation which explains them down to our understandings, so that the perusal of the work is as intelligible and fascinating as going through a novel.

These books will be to my Library what the pictures of his ancestors on the wall are

to the English lord. They underlie all my other books. They are foundations.

A Library can easily be too much up to date, and have an air of flippancy.

II

THE BOOK LOVER'S CONFESSION

It is just as well to be honest. The Booklover has his little vice of vanity.

I am proud of these splendid volumes. They stand, backs up, on my table now, and and I walk around them and gloat. I look at them in the morning when the sunlight comes in at the window, and at night when the artificial light floods them. So you have seen a boy admire his new shoes or a girl her pretty frock. Is there any joy of ownership quite so filling to the soul as owning a coveted book?

I think of how my neighbors will envy me. There's the Widow Jergens, that lives in the fine house up the avenue, is president of the Woman's Club and sets herself up as a literary person. She will drop in some day

for tea, and my wife will show her these books, and she will not sleep for two nights for envy.

Of course I would not confess this to a soul but you, and I go about with an air of indifference and say: "Oh, yes. They are a few books I have got in order to keep up my library. Rather good, are they not?" as though such a thing happened every day. But, between us, it is an Event. I am proud as a rooster. And if I were simple and gave frank expression to my feelings, like a child, or a rooster, and if I were not a hypocritical adult trained to conceal his real sentiments, I would probably hop up on a chair and crow.

The school-master, too. He hasn't seen them yet. He is coming over to-morrow. How he will look at them, and tremble on the brink of them, and finally dive in! I can see him now, in my mind's eye, exclaiming, and h'm-ing, and ah-ing and well-well-

ing, as he turns the pages. I shall have to go to bed and leave him, for he will probably sit up till morning over them.

And the parson. And old man Dickenson. I'll have to watch Dickenson. He is honest enough, but singularly unmoral when it comes to borrowing books. I had the mischief's own time getting back my de luxe Anatole France from him. If worst comes to worst I shall have to get me a book-hound, a dog, you know, that traces books as a shepherd-dog watches sheep. There are none such? Well, maybe not. But there ought to be. And doubtless there will be, as necessity is the mother of invention. We have wolf-hounds, and blood-hounds, setters and pointers to indicate game, carriage-dogs and lap-dogs, St. Bernards to find travellers lost in the snow, and even terriers to catch rats. Why shouldn't a race be bred to follow the books that have been pilfered from our libraries by fellows like Dickenson?

* * * * *

I have cases for my books, but once in a while I like to get one or a set out and give it a place of honor on the library table, as the Japanese go and get some one vase and set it in the middle of the floor.

Books should not be left too long on the shelf, but should come out occasionally and mingle with the family. Otherwise their glass cases will become coffins.

Sometimes even I take a book to bed with me. What better companion to defy the terrors of wakefulness.

III

ADVENTURES IN A LIBRARY

In my library are a hundred doors through which I can escape from the commonplace. Through any one of them I step into another world. Why go to the trouble and expense of travel, while all that lust of adventure which other men can gratify only at great expense and inconvenience is now mine, while I repose upon my shoulder blades with my feet on the table? Here is my fairyland, my many realms of eternal childhood.

Here I can wander with the Buddha, that figure of the past which, although to us but a washed and faint impression, is to millions of people the inspiration of life.

Through another door I am plunged at once into the mystic past of the Chinese. Or I find the literature of Ancient Persia,

the early expanding thought of the Aryan peoples, the ancestors of the Europeans of today.

In another volume are the early sacred books and literature of Japan. While we are now amazed over Japan's sudden acceptance of modern civilization, it is seldom noted that this is the second time the Japanese have seized upon an advanced civilization and forcibly made it their own. Exactly what they are doing now they did some 1300 years ago with the Chinese civilization.

Here are the records of Arabic literature, colorful and interesting, the early history, the philosophy, the religion, the remains of poetry and fiction that preceded the Tales of the Arabian Nights' Entertainment.

Here are the writings of Ancient Egypt—texts and tales from the coffins and pyramids and papyri of this remarkable people.

As I look at these volumes, their significance grows upon me. They loom, dark

and towering, before the imagination. They are the Ghost of the World.

Better it would be to say: They are the Blood of the World.

For in these books is the sum total of all that men have lived for, fought for, died for, were crucified for, martyred for.

Here are the records now forever imperishable, the footprints of mankind, struggling by various pathways, up the slopes of progress toward the summit—God.

They represent the slowly developing instinct of immortality—the first feint notes of the Song of Songs, the dim dawning of the light of Brotherhood, the hope that still persists in the race that

“This song of love, now low and far,
Ere long shall swell from star to star,
This light the breaking day that tips
The golden-spired Apocalypse.”

IV

BOOKS AS PERSONALITIES

The real population of the world is not composed of its human bodies, but of its books. Men come and go; books remain, Life is merely a feeder of literature. Things, which Johnson said are the sons of heavens pass away, while words, which he called the daughters of earth, remain. Look at your Bible; the men who believed and the men who disbelieved it have fallen like autumn leaves, yet the book itself is ever green.

A book has a personality of its own, quite apart from its author, just as a child cannot be accounted for by its father and mother. A book leads its own life. It expands its mastery over men independently of their struggles against it, or it dies despite their most meticulous incubation. It wrestles, not

with flesh and blood, but with other books. Slowly the eternal primacies of literature are formed. The great books of the past descend to us out of the grey dawn of the world, priests forever after the order of Melchisedek, King of Salem, who was without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.

A book is a man raised to his highest power. It is the freed spirit of man disembarassed of his non-essentials. The real superman is a book.

V THE EAST

The East!

Romance. Mystery. Tyranny. Strange
Idolatry. Thought. Philosophy. Color.
Splendor. Squalor. Adventure. Horror.
Luxury.

The East! "Where there ain't no Ten
Commandments." And where there are
Commandments so old that the Ten of Moses
seem yesterday's news.

The East! Where every form of self-
indulgence, every conception of voluptuous-
ness, every throne of pride, every gawd of
jewels, every caress of costly stuffs, every
cruel satisfaction of revenge, has been worked
out through centuries of imaginative cunning,
to its nth power,—and discarded.

The East, where all the young West
strives for is an old story, half forgotten, by

the heart of man, which has turned again unto itself, feeding upon the Infinite.

The East! It underlies the history of the world.

The East is an old woman, deep-hearted, dreamy-eyed, and the West is a child playing about her knees. Her heart is sweet with memories, and very sad. All memories are a little sad, but when they reach back a thousand years their sadness becomes magnificent, like that of the gods.

The East is not pure. It is not evil. It is human. It has committed all crimes. It has known all heights of holiness. There is no dirt and degradation it has not plumbed. There is no kingly splendor nor monkish sanctity it has not exhausted.

The East is the eternal paradox. It is dead. It will never die. It is hideous, repulsive; yet it is beautiful and lures men's souls. It enfolds the past, lives upon the past; yet it holds in itself the promise of the future.

The East is the fountain of history, the home of tradition, the native land of legend, the mother of all religions, the grandfather of all philosophies, the cloud-land of dreams.

The gods of Greece are gone; the East is full of half-gods.

Every new step in advance made by Western civilization has been caused by folding back upon the East. After the Crusades came the Renaissance. After the conquests of Rome came Christianity, an Eastern cult. After the East India Company came the British Empire, and modern colonization.

The East is always reactionary. It is the foe of progress. It has no stomach for reforms. Its mind is ghost-ruled. Yet only as the West turns back to fight it, civilization is advanced by another wave.

Out of the East come poisons, vast powers of evil. In 1917 the West, America, renewed the old struggle of the ages, the Youth of the world endeavoring to rid itself of the obses-

sions of the world's Old Age, those old and vicious ideas of Monarchy, of Caste, of World Conquest, of Militarism, of Race Superiority. The German crime reaches back past Nebuchadnezzar.

If you would understand Wilhelm the Hohenzollern you must read in the inscriptions upon cylinders of clay or carven on fragments of broken statues, now translated by modern scholarship, the mad ambitions of Lugal-zaggisi and the cities he destroyed, and of how he in turn was overthrown by Sarrukin who, beginning as king of a small country, came to be "sovereign of all lands, and servant only to the gods." And now what is he? A curious and barbarous name.

History is full of irony!

Here in the most ancient records of the world, in the mists of early history, we decipher what reads like the rape of Belgium!

"He smote the wall of E-Ninmar—and destroyed its territory from Lagash as far as

the sea—he smote—his weapons he washed in the sea—he battled with the king of Uruk—and his hand captured him—and in fetters he led him—through the gate of Enlil.”

So old is Wilhelm’s crime!

But out of the womb of the East comes also Good, those redemptive spiritual forces that shall save the world, those visions that shall bring the Golden Age.

For in the East is that same strange mixture of Good and Evil, God and Devil, Angel and Beast, that is in the deep heart of man.

In the literature of the East are Bibles old and hoary before ours was written, records of civilizations that have passed away before Moses was, of peoples that had cities and gardens and armies, toiling millions and proud rulers, that had all shrivelled and disappeared in ancient time, long before Abraham.

Here you will read of philosophies before Socrates, hierarchies before Rome, art before

Phidias and Praxiteles, stories before the
Arabian Nights, love songs before Sappho.

It is all like walking through enchanted
palaces and fairy plaisances, full of thin
golden ghosts; or like faded tapestry come
to life, its horsemen caracolling again, its
trumpets blowing, its ladies mincing, its little
children playing among the Spring flowers.

What other writings can so intoxicate the
imagination, so awaken the soul to feed upon
the mysterious tragedy-comedy of human-
kind?

The impetuous West breaks against the
imperturbable East, always, even as Matthew
Arnold describes how Rome conquered the
last and was in turn captured by her spirit:

“In his cool hall, with haggard eyes,
The Roman noble lay;
He drove abroad, in furious guise,
Along the Appian way.

He made a feast, drank fierce and fast,
And crown'd his hair with flowers—
No easier nor no quicker pass'd
The impracticable hours.

The brooding East with awe beheld
Her impious younger world,
The Roman tempest swell'd and swell'd
And on her head was hurl'd.

The East bow'd low before the blast
In patient, deep disdain;
She let the legions thunder past,
And plunged in thought again.

'Poor world,' she cried, 'so deep accurst,
That runn'st from pole to pole
To seek a draught to slake thy thirst—
Go, seek it in thy soul!'

VI

THE RAVINGS OF A BOOK LOVER

Libraries are more august than kings' councils. Enter into a library. The very air is hushed, heavy with thought. It is as if some still herald trumpeted in noiseless thunder to your soul's ear: "For we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal!" You are in the privy council of mankind. All around you are the mute rulers of the world. They do not strive nor cry, but they have their way with us. You are in the one room where dreams come true. Here, stripped of its sordiness, life rises like a pure flame, burning not with consuming fire but with creative joy. Here the sham world is cut out, with its hustling pettiness, its brute thirst and hungers, its poison-

ous compromises, its successes and failures, both humbugs, and its lies that swarm around every pure aspiration like septic flies. Here is the house at last, as Nero said of his golden palace, fit for a human being to live in. Here is the true landscape of souls; for yonder loom the high mountain peaks of Plato's snow-tipped ideals piercing the veins of heaven, and the misty masses of Kant and Swedenborg; there lie the April fields of Chaucer, the sunny humanities of Boccaccio, the tropic fancies of "The Thousand and One Nights," the bare crags and long deep shadows of Ibsen, and the romance land of Scott, where

"The orange flower perfumes the bower,
The breeze is on the sea."

Let me live and die among books. And
when I die let my transmigration be next
into a little worm that feeds upon an Elzevir.
That immortality which men but dream,

it is books that have it. All the higher instincts of men find their reality only in books. Man has the shadow, books the substance. Do we dream of living forever? It is only books that gain this we long for. Do we want to be loved for ourselves alone? Books are; no man is. Do we dread old age? Books alone know where is the fountain of youth. Actual life is but a rough sketch. In books life is well done. Only in precious print do they "live happily ever after."

The book is the candle, and men and women are the moths that fly about it.

It is books that are the eternal personalities; human beings are the little coral insects that build them.

Our histories hitherto have described the deeds of men; future histories will describe the careers of books.

The book is the last resting place of man, the real universal cemetery. Here lie all that remains of the Caesars and the

Ptolemies. Their bones have been stolen from their proud tombs. Books have done for them what all the embalmers of Egypt and the mausoleum builders of Rome could not do.

Great captains of war, politicians, artists, money makers—it is the humble writer who judges them all, allots them to their heaven in the house of fame, damns them to oblivion, or misspells their names.

The wars of the past were fought with iron tubes charged with powder; the wars of the future will be fought with quill tubes charged with ink.

Do you know that I think the ideal marriage would be the meeting of two books? Thus would pure soul mate with pure soul. It is when souls drag bodies along into the affair that trouble is brewed.

And the children?

Out of the union of their ideas would be born the noblest of children, new books.

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